

RETHINKING ENGLISHNESS: MULTICULTURALISM AND THE QUESTION OF BELONGING

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ABSTRACT

The notion of Englishness defies any fixed framework of cultural representation which in the course of time has enlarged itself to include a medley of disparate culturalities and discursive possibilities. The idea of a multicultural society challenges its homogenizing premise of essentialist identification with its diversified heterogeneous accommodations pointing out a summative erosion of the legacy of the Empire and its exclusively nationalistic connotations. As a post-imperialist nation England is fast losing its hold on the faltering myth of Englishness and its sense of a coherent national identity making rooms for a large numbers of non-English populace at different levels of identification and belonging. The paper seeks to demonstrate these ways in which England with its cosmopolitan inclusivity manages to re-invent itself nourishing a common culture of fragmented loyalties and affiliations created out of the multiple movements and cross- connectivities of migration and multicultural realities.

KEYWORDS: Englishness, Multiculturalism, National Identity, Belonging, Ethnicity & Immigration

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INTRODUCTION

What is Englishness? There is no familiar response to this specific culturality as Englishness has become an eluding concept in the discourse of nationality and belonging. It is because the English have always been reluctant to provide a well-defined definition of Englishness. The quest for a quintessential elementality of Englishness has thus become a common question in the cultural and literary discourses of the diasporic world which has continually informed and influenced the national life of England with multiple journeys and homing practices. Affected by the disparate consequences of decolonization, diasporic migrations and an increasingly multicultural cosmopolity, the social life of England is fast changing resulting in the development of a more inclusive and diversified Englishness that acknowledges the identities of all its people living in a post-imperialist multicultural Britain.

In the contemporary world no nation can exclusively be designated as a specific point of origin, transit and destination as almost all nation are affected by the multiple and varied experience of globalizing diasporization. The migrants crossing the borders from a familiar territory and settling in some alien ambience register a sense of unbelonging, and nourish an urge to redefine their inner selves and to reinvent their respective 'homes' in an estranged territoriality. Though displacement and dislocations are performed for varied reasons, they have historically strengthened and reshaped the social cohesion as well as enriched the cultural lives of the people living in this amalgamated totality. England in this context has become one of the diasporic centers of migration to which people from erstwhile colonies migrate for better prospects of their lives. England with its geographical and cultural spaces seeks to evolve a "new world order" (Farrior 403) in which there is scope for the immigrants to

reconfigure their identities resisting the power structures and dominant ideologies of race and ethnicity and explore possibilities for a happy multicultural existence and relationships. This opens up an undeterred discourse about the irrelevance of the old Eurocentric model of representations reorienting it towards a new world of multicultural belonging that is ordered around multiple movements and negotiations. This discursive turn effectuates a globalizing space which is found to be productively in a constant flux.

Englishness then becomes a constructed concept that lingers in the ritualistic grammar of England as a post-imperialist nation in its multicultural presentment which needs to be redefined in transnational and intercultural perspectives. To be specific, England has had a black and Asian population for over four hundred years which is as old as the history of the Empire abroad. It is worth mentioning says Susheila Nasta in *Home Truths: Fictions of the South Asian Diaspora in Britain* that “Britain was as much the home of the colonial encounter as the colonies themselves normally situated abroad in the so-called peripheries” (2). She astutely remarks that the historians like Burton, Fryer and Visram have successfully argued that the Black and Asian immigrants arrival in Britain for generations in the moments of decolonization and after independence was not simply the residue of the end of the empire but was the culmination of a long but often hidden relationship, a relationship that has persistently been written out of the nation’s political cultural and literary histories (2). The substantial presence of the black and Asian population in Britain during the years following the second world war thus challenged the “embedded conceptions of Englishness” which is viewed as an “imagined homeland” grounded on the “ideas of purity, rootedness and cultural dominance” and exposes “the less palatable realities underlying the ancient myth of England as a green and pleasant land” (Nasta 2).

Many cultural critics have pointed out that the myth of homogeneity attached to the idea of Britain as a nation, an “imagined community” (Anderson 13) was both a result of the imperialist agenda and the evolution of a eurocentric modernity that was unable to catch the true spirit of an inevitable immigrant past. At this critical juncture, the essentialist myth of Englishness is long endured but exists with an intercultural divergency and racial mixture that heterologically informed the British life. For the last few centuries, “Englishness has often been constructed as a heterogeneous, conflictual composite of contrary elements, an identity which is not identical with itself” that focalizes the inner dissonance of the ruptured self of England divided within itself for it cannot be represented and characterized by “an essential core identity from which the other is excluded” and it is this non-fixedness that “enabled it to be variously and counteractively constructed” (Young *Colonial Desire* 3). As Sushela Nasta has rightfully observes:

Britain will inevitably become a polarized cultural territory, an embattled space where difference signified by race, colour or ethnicity is forced into makeshift ‘ghettos’ on the edges of the nation. Moreover, the ‘homes’ of those living in such spaces necessarily become temporal and temporary in the xenophobic imaginary of the white population, no-go areas on derelict estates, which contrast with the supposedly ‘fixed’ landscapes of Anglo-English settlement in the suburban Home Countries. (3)

Nasta quotes Caryl Philips who sarcastically laments the dissolution of a once great colonial power; i.e. Britain who “always sought to define its people By identifying those who don’t belong” (quoted in Nasta 3). Thus the Asian migrants in Britain have to face the inherent problematics of belonging and challenge the existing cartographies of Englishness by creating rooms for an all-inclusive spatiality which embraces the logic of coherent cultural acceptability of representation:

For in a post-imperial nation that, by the end of 20th Century, was fast losing its grip on any sense of a coherent national identity, the presence of these others within exposed the underside not only the faltering myth of Empire and its waning fantasy of an invented 'Englishness', but also complicated the apparently seamless history of western modernity itself. (6)

Thus, the diasporic presence in Britain needs to be redefined in relation to the shifting notions and contours of Englishness in the elusive terrain of belonging and multicultural existence. The fixity of the boundaries is to be reconfigured in a progressive model of inclusivity which is contingent on the frequent and deliberate erosion of the nation by the diasporic communities in Britain. The "invented tradition" (Nasta 3) of Englishness then can be seen as necessary development of an organic integration of these diasporic black and Asian communities to a central phenomenon of belongingness:

For the walls of Britain as 'island nation' have consistently been eroded and reconfigured by the uncovering of a more permeable and diasporic geography, a geography which both contradicts and complicates the comfortable nationalist binaries of home and abroad, and provides an alternative reading of ways in which the bases of modernity have most frequently been conceptualised. Moreover the voyages in of Britain's post- colonial subjects have consistently drawn the attention of cultural critics to the liberatory, transgressive and shape-shifting elements of being 'unhoused', redefining the terms and opening up the reductive prescriptions of essentialist ideologies, whatever their racial or cultural derivations. As a result, the narrow agenda of Britain's domestic policy of cultural containment has been progressively deconstructed. (Nasta 3-4)

Anderson in *Imagined Communities* describes nationality as a "cultural artifact" that is indelibly influenced by specific historical and cultural contexts and is "capable of being transplanted" in a variety of cultural contexts derived from a range of nostalgic cross-connections to an idealized temporality and territoriality (4). The notion of Englishness is rooted the 19th century imperialist ideology which attempts to define its spirit in the form of a common belief in a national identity that depends upon a "unity of identity and purpose" (Brooker and Widdowson 141). To invoke the notion of national belonging, terms like 'England' or 'Englishness' is deliberately worked out into play in the cultural and literary cartographies of representation to inaugurate and illustrate the specific spirit of Englishness. One of the stock representations in the period is built on the image of the 'gentleman' which is said to represent the quintessential characteristics of Englishness: "it is impossible to think of the character of England without thinking also of the character of a gentleman" who is modeled on a bunch of refined civic qualities "a code of conduct – good form the not doing of things which are not done: reverse: a habit of understatement" (Giles and Middleton 59) which is well-exploited by Kazuo Ishiguro in his *The Remains of the Day* in the form of a dignified butler affecting a concentrated form of exclusionist Englishness:

It is sometimes said that butlers only truly exist in England. Other countries, whatever title is actually used, have only man servants. [...] Continentals are unable to be butlers because they are as a breed incapable of the emotional restraint which only the English race are capable of. [...] In a word, 'dignity' is beyond such persons. We English have an important advantage over foreigners in this respect and it is for this reason that when you think of a great butler, he is bound, almost by definition, to be an Englishman. (43)

In the latter half of the 20th century, the population of England underwent many significant changes as a result of the growing number of immigrants. Migration from the former British colonies and other nationalities makes the English

world emergently diversified and challenges the ethnic make-up of the nation that has formerly for most part been white (Weedon 27). The postcolonial displacements and dislocations create a new space for cultural diversity and cross-cultural negotiation that makes the nation of fixed national identity seem unstable and problematic (Head 199). England in this fertile ambience of multiculturalism is subject to a series of changes in the reproduction of its quintessential Englishness. Because the narrative of national unity is open to the diverse forms of representation and cultural diversity, each modern nation becomes a cultural hybrid. Cultural intermixing further is intensified due to mass mobilization of electronics informatics worldwide and the process of globalization (Barker 255). Bhabha in *Nation and Narration* argues that nation as an idea is culturally compulsive to the 'impossible unity of the nation as a symbolic force' (5). The foundational functions of a nation in this differential discursively are unable to define its explicit premises where "the origins of national traditions turn out to be as much acts of affiliation and establishment as they are moments of disavowal, displacement, exclusion and cultural contestation" (Bhabha 5).

Kumar reinforcing an inversion of the imperial attitude of the West argues that it is worthwhile to "see English national identity as a kind of residue; the response to and the result of England's engagement with its imperial venture, and of its perception of its mission in the world" (44). Stuart Hall in "Conclusion: The Multicultural Question" explains how Britishness is historically formed and can be seen as an "empty signifier, the norm, against which 'difference' (ethnicity) is measured" (221). As Hall observes, "the continuous intercourse with 'difference', which was at the heart of colonization has framed the 'other' as a constitutive element of British identity" ("Conclusion" 218). Hall believes that English identity as based on the concept of nation (al) and racial others and Englishness is the projection of that quality of being different from other as a racially dominant entity (218). Therefore, 'race' is only applied to those who are not white as whiteness is regarded and privileged as a prime signifier which is said to function as the "human form" (Dyer 1). Analogously, Brah posits that while the effects of class, gender, race, sexuality is experienced alike both by the white and black communities, "racialisation of white subjectivity is often not manifestly apparent to white groups because 'white' is a signifier dominance" (105).

In his seminal book *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* Paul Gilroy discovers the inherent waves of incompatibility between the black and white people living in Britain and the manner it marks the evolution of the image of the black which is formed historically as a source of all negativities (Pines 58). Jim Pines reflects upon the title of the book which symbolizes the white dominance over black in England and points out to the mismatched irreconcilability of both the categories as the flag is closely associated with the political far-sight (58). The flag as an emblem of the Nation's invented tradition helps the formation of a national cohesivity in term of racial similarity (McLeod 70). The diasporan to England brought with them their various cultural practices and introduce to the life of England a new form of representation which necessarily clash with the kind of life the white were living. They embrace an anti-normative life and thus posed a threat to the once homogeneous, traditional English way of life and thus, "the process of national decline was presented as coinciding with the dilution of once homogeneous and continuous national stock by alien strains" (Gilroy 45-46). The traditional English social order is disrupted by the inflow of diverse migrants into Britain which generates a new reality by reshaping the old values of English society with novel progressive form. The cultural 'others' represented by black community acts as a "real presence and cultural threat to the personal image of England" (Gikandi 70). The developing complicity of antithetical politicisation between blackness and Englishness is clearly reflected in the racist discourses and the ideologies of the political history of Britain which is aptly summarized by Gilroy in *the Black Atlantic*: "Nationalism and racism become so clearly identified that to speak of the nation is to speak automatically in racially exclusive terms.

Blackness and Englishness are constructed incompatible, mutually exclusive identities. To speak of the British or English people is to speak of the white people” (27-28).

Tilley and Heath outline the ways in which the modern age is especially vulnerable to a diminishing sense of the value of nationalism in Western countries. The effects of globalization and economic transactions around the world have greatly influenced the formation of traditional national identities and demonstrate a marked decline of interest in national pride. Tilley and Heath however, are attentive to the past image of Britain and attempts to recollect the spirit of cultural diversity in Britain which has always been an inseparable feature of Englishness (662).

New forms of belonging are thus evolved from this multicultural reality represented by metropolitan city life in which new modes of identification and belonging are carried out and the reconstruction of this Englishness as Byrne argues “involved imagination of openness, as cosmopolitanism and vibrancy” which is the hallmark of an English society (152).

Let us now reflect at this point on the relation of multicultural belonging in Britain to the globalizing inclusive patterns of Britishness which is fast replacing a monocultural presentment of Englishness. To think in a more general framework of intellection human nature has an innate tendency towards diversity and each culture has a singular, inexplicable, ineradicable identification which embodies a distinct vision of life. The influence of culture colours the individual’s way of thinking and it is a human need to belong to some familiar culture. All cultures are equal and they nourish and sustain certain human capacities cultivating different virtues and temperaments. Stuart Mill was very sensitive to the spirit of diversity. He believes that, “the absolute and essential importance of human development is in its diversity” (quoted in Parekh 41). Diversity adds richness and variety making the world aesthetically more livable as well as stimulates creativity, curiosity and deferential imagination. Each culture in this world of diversity is equally important because they mean much to their fellow members and is conducive to their needs. Cultural diversity is an inseparable phenomenon of human life which suggests that cultures were not the results of geographical contextualization reducible to temporal progressive entities in a linear historicity but the products of imagination in the playful curiousness of inventing new relationship.

Multiculturalism as a concept both at personal and national level has received considerable critique since it was applied in the public sphere in the 1970s. In this political context the new immigrants and ethnic mobility have further problematized the ambit of multiculturalism. Multiculturalism in its philosophical enterprise can be safely summarized as “abandoning the myths of homogenous and monocultural nation states” and “recognizing rights to cultural maintenance and community formation, and linking these to social equality and protection from discrimination” (Castles 12). In every institutional field it seeks to introduce the multicultural model of representation. It is a demographic description of diverse kinds of population inhabiting a particular locality, a set of specific public policies advocating a reconstruction of institutional specificities, a mode of streamlining cultural expression. Multicultural societies are subject to the increasing complex process of economic and cultural globalization. It is impossible, therefore, to maintain a self-contained and isolated form of society. Contemporary societies tending multicultural configuration have emerged against the backdrop of the traditional ideal of homogenising nation states. In the pre-modern societies, cultural communities were viewed as the representative of collective rights and left free to inaugurate their customs and practices. The modern state, however, is grounded on a very different idea of social unity. “It generally recognized only the individuals and the bearers of rights and sought to create a homogeneous legal space made up of uniform political units subject to the same body of laws and institutions” (Parekh 8-9).

Multiculturalism at this critical juncture has been passionately defended, defined, redefined and criticized. Those who subscribe to the views of multiculturalism support equality in civil rights, emphasise its positive value which becomes a claim for a tolerant society based on social harmony. However, criticism has been showered on those multicultural advocates who with some political and societal practices seek to eroticize 'otherness' in principle (Grillo 44). Such policies are identified derogatively as 'tokenism'. Turner at this point distinguishes between two kinds of multiculturalism—difference multiculturalism and critical multiculturalism. According to Turner difference multiculturalism with its political policy making is a reductionist celebration of diversity (Grillo 45) where as the challenges evolved out of critical multiculturalism can serve as a vigorous claim for a vital and "democratic common culture"(408). Other critics opine that multiculturalism is based on a divisive concept of creating faction among the inhabitants intimately favouring one community over another which promotes conflictual patterns of competition. They observe that it creates ethnic differences essentialising their defining qualities and limits the individual's right for self expression. Multiculturalism, therefore, is identified as a form of political correctness that stands in opposition to the earlier liberal model of cultural representation. W. Kymlicka terms multiculturalism as confusing because it proceeds on to drawing on the ambiguity between 'multinationalism' and 'polyethnicity' which relates to the fact of coexistent self governing societies as political units and the issues of migration (107). It needs a re-evaluation since the claims of minority rights of indigenous people are necessarily be different from those of the immigrants.

Belonging, in this problematics of contextualized transculturation has become an increasingly complex term to define as "our contemporary condition is marked by the emergence of new forms of identity politics around the globe. The new forms complicate and increase centuries-old tensions between the universalistic principles...and the particularities of nationality, ethnicity, gender, 'race', and language" (Benhabib vii). The contemporary nature of 'belonging' has thus unsettled the implicit assumptions in the conceptualisation of nation because self identifications are the "products of social relations and that groups themselves are not discrete unities" (Young "Polity and Group Difference" 226) and the distinctions in terms of class and ethnicities don't hold ground "but do entails social process of exclusion and incorporation whereby discrete categories are maintained despite changing participation and membership in the course of individual life histories" (Barth 10). Walzer opines that the idea of nation is evolved when "a single dominants group organizes the common life in a way that reflects its own authority and culture" (160) which is certainly a concern for those cultural theorists who believe that the minorities will crucially feel out sided when the majority take "the polity as an expression of their nation, on agreed purpose" (Taylor 272). The notion of belonging in these critical cross-cultural connectivities thus critiques "the myth of homogeneous and monocultural nation states" when advocating the rights of minorities in an alienated foreign atmosphere (Castles 5). There is therefore no strict relationality between the individual and the nation, the ethnicity and the nationality as created nations are "imagined political communities" and are both "limited and sovereign" (Anderson 6) because ideas can serve as powerful basis of social action and reaction. The notion of 'nation' and 'nationality', however, is a modern construction:

The idea of man without a nation appears to impose strain on the modern imagination. A man must have a nationality as he must have a nose and two ears. All this seems obvious, though, also, it is not true. But that it should come to seem so very obviously true is indeed as aspect, perhaps the very core, of the problem of nationalism. Having a nation is not an inherent attribute to humanity, but it has come to appear as such. (Gellner 6)

Hence, Identity is about belonging which gives you a sense of location in shifting relationships in a complex involvement with the outer world. It is therefore, “never complete, always in process” (Hall “Cultural Identity” 222) “partial in all its guises, never finished... always constructed and stitched together imperfectly” (Haraway 193) which is capable of joining with others to recognize a shared belonging without claiming to be another:

The growing complexity of the modern world and the awareness that this inner core of the subject was not autonomous and self-sufficient, but was formed in relations to ‘significant others’, who mediated the subject values, meanings and symbols- the culture- of the world he/she inhabited. Identity in this sociological conception, bridges the gap between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’ –between the personal and the public worlds. The fact that we project ‘ourselves’ into these cultural identities, at the same time internalizing their meanings and values, making them ‘part of us’, helps to align our subjective feelings with the objective places we occupy in the social and cultural world. (Hall “The Question” 275-76).

CONCLUSIONS

The in-between ambivalent position of the Asian and non-Asian immigrants in Britain, in this context warrants an important step towards the goal of refashioning a global open society with diverse localized forms of attachment and belonging. Cultural affiliation, then, is possible outside the stabilizing border of the nation state in a range of multicultural possibilities. With this regard, James Clifford writes in “Mixed Feelings” that “identity is never only about location, about shoring up a safe “home”, crucial as that task may be in certain circumstances. Identity is also inescapably, about displacement and relocation, the experience of sustaining and mediating complex affiliations, multiple attachments” (369). Englishness, in this sense, is ever admitting new features of multicultural belonging into its framework filling its “curious emptiness” of “cultural essence” (Young *The Idea* 236) which points out that “Englishness Paradoxically became most itself when it was far off...best performed far from home, a global identity into which others could always translate themselves” (Young *The Idea* 3). The globalizing interconnectedness of human belonging demands an outward stance in which English historical tradition and social inclusivity are well positioned to exploit the situational spatiality and multicultural relations in an ever-constitutive cosmopolity. It would be drastically unfortunate if England loses the opportunity in pursuit of an oppressively reminiscent and defensive nationalism.

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